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ABSTRACT

Since traditionally-raised boys and girls have different pre-school experience, they arrive at school differentially prepared for the educational process. As a group, boys have one set of attitudes, skills, and knowledge; girls another. To empower all children, schools must address the needs of both groups. Typically, schools have attempted to remediate the problems of boys and ignore the problems of girls. This is quite clearly the case in the earliest grades. The early educational environment, therefore, needs reshaping and refocusing if all children are to be well educated across the curriculum spectrum. Children who have dependable and flexible impulse control, who are experienced across a whole array of skills, abilities and knowledge, who can enjoy indoor and outdoor activity, enjoy intimate as well as large group activity, children with a robust sense of self and a growing sense of future possibilities, are powerful children! Early childhood environments that make this happen are early childhood environments that empower. (RH)

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EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENTS THAT EMPOWER

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENTS THAT EMPOWER

Selma Greenberg

Since traditionally raised boys and girls have different pre-school experience, they arrive at school differentially prepared for the educational process. As a group boys have one set of attitudes, skills, and knowledge, girls another. To empower all children, schools must address the needs of both groups. Typically, schools have attempted to remediate the problems of boys and ignore the problems of girls. This is quite clearly the case in the earliest grades. Early educational environment, therefore, needs reshaping and refocusing if all children are to be well educated across the curriculum spectrum.

Children who are in early childhood environments today will spend their entire adult life in the 21st Century. A staggering fact for those of us with responsibility for their education! Let us then consider what life might be like in the 21st Century. Change and ever more rapid change will be one fact of 21st Century life, especially in post-industrial countries. Both our reliance upon and our need to control science and technology will continue to increase. That is, of course, unless science and technology make the 20th Century the last. I believe we can also anticipate both further increases in life expectancy along with diminished access to resources for Westerners. I believe these conditions will lead to ever more complex political, social and interpersonal processes, relationships and structures. Consequently there will be a greater than ever need for profound and creative human responses: theoretical, moral, artistic, technological, and practical. Perhaps though the greatest need will be for citizens with dependable inner resources and a wide array of competencies.

Home and school environments which encourage all children: to participate in and have access to the widest spectrum of skills, abilities and knowledge, to develop effective and flexible self-management skills and to have confidence in their ability to learn and to work and play well with others, serve children and adults well. However, few educators and perhaps even fewer parents realize that many, perhaps most children, have had experiences from birth on which diminishes their capacity to participate fully and unselfconsciously in their own educational process. Children often come to school, even preschool, prepared to avoid participation in a host of activities.

Sex stereotyping in the home whether pursued consciously or unconsciously results in girls believing that only certain set of learnings

and behaviors are appropriate to them and boys believing, in a similar manner, that only one set of learnings and behaviors are appropriate to them. What is more, girls and boys by school age have already practised and experience different actions, reactions, and activities. Each group arrive at school with a different set of accomplishments and, in a corollary fashion, with a different set of needs.

The popular, but quite wrong headed notion that early childhood environments and elementary schools are hospitable to girls and hostile to boys, while wrong, is based on two indisputable facts. In reading, the elementary school's single most significant subject, girls' achievement is superior to boys. Similarly, when we consider children's ability to control their own behavior, girls' ability exceeds boys'. Boys are thought to be "bad" in school, girls "good". Although these facts need not lead us, necessarily, to the conclusion that schools are hospitable to young girls and hostile to boys, they do tell us two important things.

First the facts implicitly confirm that girls and boys arrive at school prepared differently for the intellectual and behavioral demands placed upon them. From birth on, girls and boys raised in traditional homes, live different lives. As a result, by preschool age, they have developed different skills, abilities, and kinds of knowledge. Perhaps, more importantly for educators, is the converse that each group has failed to develop certain skills, abilities, and knowledge. This failure if uncorrected will inhibit their participation in a wide array of human activities.

Schools deal quite differently with the gaps in the girls' and boys' backgrounds. They remediate the gaps in the boys' backgrounds and ignore those of the girls'. Girls' problems remain hidden.

WHEN RAISED IN TRADITIONAL HOMES:

YOUNG GIRLS MORE OFTEN

HAVE VERBAL EXPERIENCES (1)
HAVE SMALL MUSCLE ACTIVITIES (3)
HAVE REPETITIVE ACTIVITIES (5)
HAVE NURTURING ACTIVITIES (7)
HAVE ONE-TO-ONE ACTIVITIES (9)
HAVE ROLE REHEARSAL EXPERIENCES (11)
LEARN FROM ADULT MODELLING (13)
GAIN EARLY IMPULSE CONTROL (15)

YOUNG BOYS MORE OFTEN

HAVE SPATIAL EXPERIENCES (2)
HAVE LARGE MUSCLE ACTIVITIES (4)
HAVE INVENTIVE ACTIVITIES (6)
HAVE MANAGING ACTIVITIES (8)
HAVE LARGE GROUP ACTIVITIES (10)
TRY-OUT FUTURE LIFE OPTIONS (12)
LEARN BY DIRECT INSTRUCTION (14)
ARE CONFIRMED IN THEIR WORTH (15)

The chart of page 3 reveals a rather comprehensive list of differences that exist between girls and boys by the time they arrive at age three or four in an early childhood setting. Whether the result of conscious, unconscious or subconscious ideology, parents not only offer different childhood experiences to their children, depending on the child's sex, they point them to a different future as well. From the way the children are held, to the language they hear (including pitch) to the toys they are given, to the friends they have, all is precoded for the child, either male or female. In fact so ubiquitous and all encompassing are the differences, they are difficult to distinguish. The late Marshall McLuhan, technology and media commentator, once attempted to explain the problem of even perceiving that which most saturates your environment. He said that its like fish and water. Fish do not know they live in water, they think that's all there is!

It is helpful, I believe, in understanding the gender based differences in young children, if one has a general profile of gender ideology into which the young child, even before birth, is being programmed.

I have indentified three myths which undergird gender ideology in our society. The first myth is the Myth of the Opposite Sex. The skills, abilities, attitudes and knowledge of one sex is opposite or different from the skills, abilities, attitudes and knowledge of the other. This myth offers us the idea that gender is the most important discrimination in life. It is not till we get to the second myth, the Myth of Male as #1, the one made in God's image, the "real thing" and thus, female as #2, other, adjunct, associate, assistant, that we get: inequities, inequalities, sexism. Differences alone would not give us sexism. Differences plus differing values and super-ordinate and sub-ordinate relationships do. The myth that

completes gender ideology in the West is the myth of Male as Sexual Beast. Males are sexual beasts, females their natural victims. This third myth encourages us to view the male as gifted or burdened with sexual energies, the female as energyless, sexless or at the most, tastefully or minimally sexually endowed. Children are reared and educated by people reared and educated in these myths and the results limit everyone's future.

It is important for all of us, but particularly for those who work in the academe to understand that these myths, as well as others, do not result from those much maligned "old wife's tales" nor the thinking of uneducated, ignorant, folk, but are tales engendered, supported and re-enforced by the academic community. These myths and the resulting environment they produce permit mothers and fathers to perceive babies of the exact same height, weight and shape as powerful and burly if male, petite and adorable if female. It is these myths that encourage a constant focus on unlimited, future possibilities for the male child, particularly if white and middle class. The female, on the other hand, is focused on present appearance and helplessness. So, "What are you going to be when you grow up?" is a question typically addressed to little boys, while "How pretty you look!" is a statement typically addressed to little girls. Boys grow up to do, girls to be.

In asserting that girls and boys arrive at early childhood environments with a different set of educational needs and in further asserting that the needs of males will be addressed and those of females will be ignored, the reasons for this are somewhat difficult to uncover. We can, of course, if we wish, see it as just another instant of the Myth of Male as # 1. The problems that boys experience are more important because they are the problems of boys. Indeed, the greater saliency of boys in classrooms has been documented by research. This heightened saliency of boys

in classrooms is indicated by the greater number of: instructions, questions, comments and responses directed to them by the teacher. This greater saliency is not always positive for boys, as we shall discuss later, but it is almost always negative for girls. Early childhood educational theory, faculty and curriculum all contribute to the creation of an environment which through mind boggling coincidence or masterful design simultaneously spotlights boys' problems while masking the problems of girls. Before we consider theory, faculty and curriculum, let us briefly look at some of the male, female differences enumerated on page 3. From birth to six months of age males generally are held more than females, then after six months females are held more than males (17). The ramifications of this single finding is enormous and complex. Boys are held more than girls from birth to six months probably for both good and not so good reasons. Because boy babies are more liable to natural environmental insult than girls, there may be a tendency to be more protective of them. However, the preference for male children would also account for their receiving more attention from birth to six months. At six months when locomotion begins, boys are released into the environment and girls are held close. This environmental release that boys experience will have many behavioral as well as cognitive consequences. This early release into the environment will continue over time so that boys as they grow up will continue to cover more distance, play more outside, wander and roam more than girls. Boys will explore more space than girls, they will use their large muscles more, and because they are outside they will play with larger objects than girls, and with larger groups of children than girls. The greater spatial freedom of boys will be matched by greater behavioral freedom. Parents because they fear boys may become "sissies", may be insufficiently brave and adventuresome,

they simply do not demand the same degree of behavioral conformity from their sons as they do from their daughters. Daughters, it is believed, can not be socialized too strictly. Boys often arrive at school semi-civilized, girls tamed. Girls and boys have quite distinct but nonetheless real behavioral problems. By simply labeling the inhibited behavior girls exhibit as "good" behavior, schools can ignore the girls' problems and can concentrate on correcting the absence of impulse control, the "bad" behavior of boys. But both "too good" girls and "too bad" boys will be less effective learners than children with good flexible control of their impulses. Indeed there is evidence that extreme passivity is a more serious impediment to learning than mild forms of hyperactivity. Effective behavior strategies, like other effective strategies for learning, are found among children, raised more, rather than less equally. They can be quiet when the classroom situation requires attentive, focused behavior. They can be uninhibitedly active when such behavior is acceptable. Traditionally raised boys frequently suffer from an absence of behavioral control coupled with a lack of eye hand coordination, the consequence of their having had too little small muscle activities. This results in their having difficulties in focusing, screening, attending, receiving and participating in the learning process. Concentrated, focused attention is necessary for the development of cognitive skills. Traditionally raised girls have impulse control that is so great, so inflexible, and that uses up so much of their energies, that often little is left over for questioning, for seeking, for exploring, for inventing and for asserting. These girls have great difficulty participating in the instructional process, as well as in all processes requiring vigor and vitality. Schools do not intervene in the behavioral problems of girls, but act only to help resolve the behavioral problems boys experience. This results in an amazing, if

depressing mental health phenomena. While, during the early years of childhood, it is males who in overwhelming numbers are the clients of social workers, psychologists and psychiatrists, at eighteen it is the reverse. That is when we see the females seeking out the mental health professional.

Academic needs are dealt with in exactly the same way as behavioral needs. The academic needs of males are systematically addressed, the academic needs of females are systematically ignored. To some extent this is due to the fact that like her mental health problems, her academic problems will not be visible for quite some years. Many aspects of our girl rearing habits prepare her well for school. Not only is her behavior thought to be school appropriate, but other of her experiences will prepare her well for early reading and writing. At six months when her brothers are released into the environment, she is being held, held back and held inside. One consequence of being an "insider" is that she will listen to and participate in language more than her outside brother. Her play, activities, too, centered as they are on role rehearsal, will encourage speech rather than movement. The more she will hear and practise speech, the more her vocabulary will develop and the more familiar she will become with the form and structure of language. At a young age she "knows" a lot of words and she knows how words work. This will be an enormous aid to her in learning to read.

Because a young girl's play is often sedentary, and inside based, it frequently involves her small muscles. She dresses and undresses dolls, strings beads, cuts, colors and paints. She, more than her brothers, develops good finger and hand dexterity, preparing her to write and draw easily and enjoyably. All her life she will continue to explore these competencies developed so early in her life. She will knit, do needlepoint and make lace. Her activities will give her many opportunities to

focus on small objects. When in school, she is asked to observe the minute differences which distinguish letters, one from the other, unlike her brother, she will not find this a novel or taxing experience. So the traditionally raised girl will be ready for beginning school instruction. Verbal play and practice, small muscle activities, attention to details, all will blend together and she will be a "natural" at reading and writing. But what price will she pay for her sedentary life-style, the sex-appropriate behavior, her physical confinement?

In 1964, the British novelist, C. P. Snow, wrote an essay, "The Two Cultures" (18). In it he deplored the scientific ignorance of many of Britain's most "educated" citizens. The result, he observed, from offering to one student group a totally scientific education while offering to another a totally classical or literary one. In America, observed Snow, this was not so severe a problem since children received a scientific orientation through their toys. Snow's assessment of the crucial impact toys and play make to one's later intellectual competence was as astute as it was unusual. Since his focus was primarily on Britain, he did not press on with his observation. Had he done so, and had his consciousness been raised, he might have further observed some striking parallels between educated Britons and educated Americans. Educated Americans also live in two different cultures, one based on gender. The toys which give American children their scientific orientation are not the toys given to all American children. Beginning with the early childhood environment and continuing through the elementary grades, the curriculum will stress the skills, abilities and knowledge boys must develop in order to be successful in school, but with which girls have already had extensive practice. Because girls look so capable in their first school years while their brothers struggle, girls are thought to be advantaged in

school. But who is being better served, the children who are having their learning deficits addressed or those who are having their learning deficits ignored?

Consider the typical early childhood environment into which the young child is placed. We can observe in that environment a great many verbal activities: circle time, show and tell, singing games, songs, and stories; opportunities for small muscle development: cutting, pasting, painting, sorting, stringing beads, peg play, table games, and cooking, assistance in gaining impulse control: rule setting and rule enforcement; all are structured into the young child's day. These are the activities the youngsters are strongly encouraged to do each day. These are the activities promoted on a regular basis. If we look at page 3 again, we can easily see how crucial these activities are in remediating the learning deficits of the young boy. On the other hand, the educational deficits of girls are not systematically addressed. They are left to chance or choice. By leaving to chance or choice: spatial activities: opportunities for block building, exploring the outdoors, creating one's own spatial boundaries in indoor and outdoor play; large motor activities: running, jumping, throwing, catching, lifting, pulling, dodging, dancing, exercise, and gymnastics; investigatory and experimental activities: use of scales, weights, magnets, instruments, and tools; the activities necessary to remediate the educational deficits of young girls find no regular and systematic place in the curriculum. It is a distinct possibility, in fact not unlikely, that a young girl may spend a year or two in an early childhood setting and have no or few experiences with spatial activities, most large muscle activities and investigatory and experimental activities. For these activities form no part of the structured curriculum because they are most frequently consigned to that place in the curriculum desig-

nated as "free play".

"Free play" activities, as distinguished from activities which are structured into the curriculum, are activities which children are free to choose, but more importantly free to avoid. Structured activities may be thought of as required activities in which all children are expected to (and generally do) participate. By the way, to those unfamiliar with early childhood environments, it may come as some surprise that nap time, snack time, and toilet time are most often programmed rather than "choice" activities. Free play is generally composed of a group of indoor and a group of outdoor activities from which children are "free" to make selections: doll play (a.k.a. the housekeeping corner and the dramatic play corner, although it's hard to understand the potential for drama that exists in the kitchen, Soap Operas, I guess), block play and play with other building materials, carpentry, play with balls, trucks, swings and doll carriages, investigatory and exploratory activities, and a selection of table games which are generally aids to developing pre-reading skills.

But how free is free play? If we consider the list of activities that comprises the array from which the children may choose, we find the list includes the most highly sex-linked activities, activities many children have learned are inappropriate for them and with which they have had no experience. Conscious that their peers will disapprove a "wrong" choice, what is familiar, what is safe, what will cause no negative comments. Better safe than sorry even at three or four!

The educational needs of young girls are generally unmet and more sadly yet, the young girl herself is held responsible. Teachers and parents alike point to all the opportunities that she had to build, to explore, to experiment, to investigate, but chose otherwise.

Large-muscle development is important for all children, but it is a particularly crucial need for the inside based young girl whose physical

development proceeds at least as quickly as young boys. Except for play with large blocks, often an all boy activity, and for dancing, an infrequently scheduled activity, other large-muscle activities only take place in gym or "outdoors". Since gym is not a subject that is often scheduled for very young children, it is to "outdoor play" that we look to observe how girls' needs are met. It comes as no surprise to many of us that the children sitting on the swings, pushing the doll carriages, sifting sand and talking to the teacher are often female, while the children running in disorganized fashion, using the climbing and balancing equipment, playing with the balls, trucks and tricycles are most often male.

Unhappily for the young girl, the ignoring of her educational needs fits well into early childhood ideology. The historic middle-class orientation of the "nursery school" is why I believe there are inequities particular to this educational environment. Because the nursery school was, at its inception, designed for the children of the upper middle class, unstated assumptions were made about the children, their families and the life they would grow up to lead. Assumptions we now can recognize as being laced through with gender and class based stereotypic beliefs. This becomes quite clear when one compares American early childhood settings with those of socialist countries. Except for teaching the young child to put on and remove outer clothing, an aid to the early childhood teacher, little emphasis is placed on teaching self-care. This is in sharp contrast to other countries where a great deal of time is spent in teaching children to wash themselves, to fold their clothes neatly after use, and to help their peers do the same. The assumption that behind every American child stands a mother ready to give bodily service and a father bringing home money, accounts, in part, for the casual attitude toward self-care, and for many other beliefs held by early childhood faculty.

One notion that has always had great appeal for early childhood educators is that of freedom for the young child. The opportunity to make choice, coupled with opportunities for "free expression" verbally and artistically are all held to be worthy aspects of the early childhood environment. These ideas have proven partially effective with middle class children whose homes are often highly structured and restrictive. It is an idea that works less well for the children of poverty. Dubbed by its critic the "hot house" or "horticultural" model, it suggests that children's choices are inherently good and adult intervention is almost always inherently bad. Thus adults should provide a good environment, then get out of the children's way and let them "grow". There is something quite paradoxical in this romantic view of children's "natural" desires, since most early childhood educators have great respect for the influence of environment on development. Yet, they have difficulty believing that children's prior experience have bent free choice to reflect what children believe is proper and appropriate for them to do. It is possible to honor children's choices which may derive from no more admirable motives than a fear of failure, a nervousness about participating in something new and a sensitivity to peer disapproval.

Early childhood educators have always valued play and have viewed it as the vehicle through which children experience the world, children's "work". This attitude does not include, suprisingly, a great respect for toys as preparation for intellectual work. Nor does it include the belief that a broad range of toys and play experience best prepares a child for learning. There is an almost anti-cognitive ethic in these environments, another outcome of the nursery school's middle class orientation. Teachers believe that the parents of these children are often narrowly bent on seeing them achieve basic skills at a young age and so, in response,

early childhood environments stress social skills and emotional adjustment. All the language activity is seen as basically social rather than cognitive. Any attempt to place early mathematics and science activities into the curriculum is seen as "pushing" children before they are ready. Again, this approach is partially effective with middle class children whose parents effectively continue to coach them in school necessary skill. It is often less useful for the children of working class parents, and the children of poverty. This aversion to cognitive learning is further supported by the commitment of many early childhood educators to the views of various early twentieth century psychologists. These psychologists preached the theory that the primary job of the young child is to achieve psycho-sexual adjustment. If this adjustment is achieved, all other aspects of growth will occur smoothly, effortlessly, naturally and at some other time. Further the aim of psychosexual adjustment is appropriate sex-role identification. Not only are the children seen as having a "stay at home, body servicing" mother and an "out in the world money making" father, the children are seen as becoming adults who will repeat the pattern. Despite the fact this model was never true of all American families and now true of only a small number, it is the family of myth and story. Books offered to children portray this vision of proper family life as well. Even in children's books in which the characters are animals, the "stay at home" mother and the "out in the world" father are the appropriate animal models. We have another paradox, while children's freedom is highly, almost mystically valued, the early childhood educator has little difficulty combining this with the most limited and limiting notions of what constitutes positive adult behavior. Behavior thought to be appropriately dependent on gender. Early childhood theory prepares the early childhood educator to view with equanimity girls and boys engaged in different play, using different toys, participating in a totally different curriculum.

Another word about curriculum. The reverence for children's freedom negatively effects large motor development. While outdoor vigorous play has always been viewed as positive, sports and regular structured exercise is frowned upon. The former because it leads to competitiveness, the latter because it is insufficiently free and creative. Large muscle activity, too, is left to choice and chance and is often left out of the young girl's curriculum.

Perhaps, it is too simplistic to say that early childhood theory prepares the early childhood educator to accept a different profile of play for girls and boys. It is maybe that the early childhood educators have little difficulty accepting stereotypic theory. Early childhood educators are frequently females. Females who have had little difficulty, in accepting the stereotypes, in their own lives. They love children; they are good with children. Even the most talented of early childhood educators often fails to see herself as particularly gifted. Rather she believes she is doing "what comes naturally". This has two rather unfortunate consequences. The first is that she does not appreciate how under-rewarded she really is. The second is that she often believes women, who are not talented with children suffer from sort of deficiency. She is often creative, musical, verbal and good with her hands. She is infrequently as good in math, science, technology and athletics. The early childhood curriculum matches her profile of interests almost perfectly.

Earlier we spoke of the greater male saliency in the early childhood environment and its probable negative as well as positive aspects. The overwhelming negative teacher classroom comments are directed at boys. They are most typically negative comments about behavior. The intent of these comments is to have boys gain greater control of their behavior. It is neither good for the boys or the girls that this is so. Neither boys

nor girls should think of boys as "bad". Additionally, girls burdened by too much impulse control, are not helped to relax that control, in such an environment. Girls need an environment permissive to relaxing control that has become too severe.

As it becomes more common for both of a young child's parents to be employed outside the home, young children will increase the amount of time they spend in early childhood environments. What happens there will continue to gain in importance. It is crucial that the architectural model of development be abandoned. One aspect of development does not sit atop or precede the other. All growth occurs simultaneously. Children are all at the same time social, emotional, physical, intellectual and moral beings. It is important for teachers to remember that their failure to provide crucial experiences created present and future avoidance, ineptness and failure.

Children who have dependable and flexible impulse control, who are experienced across a whole array of skills, abilities and knowledge, who can enjoy indoor and outdoor activity, enjoy intimate as well as large group activity, children with a robust sense of self and a growing sense of future possibilities, these are powerful children! Early childhood environments that make this happen are early childhood environments that empower!!

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